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AUTHOR Martin, Sarah E.; Clements, Mari L.
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ABSTRACT

This study examined young children's affective distress and behavioral responses to parental marital conflict. Forty-eight 4-year-olds and their parents participated in the study. Mothers and fathers independently completed measures of marital conflict, children's reactions to marital conflict, and child behavior problems, while the children completed pictorial measures of reactions to marital conflict and perceived competency. Analysis indicated that children who reported using more maladaptive behavioral responding also reported higher self-esteem. Children who had higher levels of father-reported affective distress also reported higher self-esteem. Children's behavioral responding to marital discord appears to moderate the relation between children's self-reported emotional reactivity to parental conflict and mother-reported child behavior problems. The findings suggest that children's subjective experience of marital conflict appears to play a role in their adjustment and development, beyond the effect of marital conflict alone. (Contains 15 references.) (MDM)

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Marital Conflict and Child Outcomes: The Role of Children's Affect and Coping Processes

Sarah E. Martin and Mari L. Clements

Poster Presented at the 1997 Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research In Child Development, Washington, D.C.

This research supported by grants from the Research and Graduate Studies Office, College of Liberal Arts, and the Center for the Study of Child and Adolescent Development, The Pennsylvania State University. Address correspondence concerning this poster to either Sarah E. Martin or Mari L. Clements, Department of Psychology, 417 Moore Building, University Park, PA 16802-3104, sem146@psuvm.psu.edu or mlc4@psu.edu.

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Abstract

While the links between marital discord and children's adjustment problems have been well established, the processes underlying this relation are less well understood. This study explored the role of children's emotional responding and behavioral coping with marital conflict in their socioemotional adjustment. Specifically, this study examined the links between children's affective distress in response to parental marital conflict, their behavioral responding to marital conflict, and their perceived competency and parent-reported behavioral adjustment. Forty-eight preschoolers and their parents provided self-report information about children's emotional and behavioral responses to parental marital discord. Children also completed a self-report measure of self-esteem and perceived competency, and parents provided information about child behavior problems.

Lower levels of child affective distress in response to marital conflict were associated with higher child perceived competency. As well, behavioral responding to marital conflict moderated the relationship between affective distress and child behavior problems, with less maladaptive behavioral responding associated with fewer behavior problems at lower levels of affective distress. Two unexpected findings were also obtained. Children who reported using more maladaptive behavioral responding also reported higher self-esteem. Children who had higher levels of father-reported affective distress also reported higher self-esteem. Findings are discussed with regard to the interactive nature of children's affective distress and behavioral responding to marital conflict, and young children's adaptation to stressful environments.

The detrimental effects of marital conflict on child development have been well documented. Children of discordant marriages evidence higher rates of behavior problems and psychopathology, as well as academic, interpersonal, and physical health problems (for a review, see Cummings & Davies, 1994). Yet while research to date has documented a link between marital conflict and children's adjustment difficulties, the processes and mechanisms underlying this relation are less well understood (Fincham, 1994).

Several lines of research have suggested that children's affective experience and behavioral responding to marital conflict may be integral to their adjustment to this family stressor. For instance, Grych and Fincham's (1990) cognitive-contextual model highlights children's cognitive processing of conflict, affective reactions, and coping behaviors as integral to children's experience of marital conflict. In addition, Cummings and colleagues have demonstrated that interadult anger is emotionally distressing and physiologically arousing for young children, and suggested that children's affective and behavioral responses to such anger may link interadult conflict and children's outcomes (E. M. Cummings & J. S. Cummings, 1988). Research has also demonstrated that children of discordant marriages are especially reactive to anger expressed between adults (e.g., E. M. Cummings, Zahn-Waxler, & Radke-Yarrow, 1984; J. S. Cummings, Pellegrini, Notarius, & E. M. Cummings, 1989). Taken together, these findings would suggest that children's emotional and behavioral responding to marital conflict may be one mechanism linking marital distress to children's adjustment difficulties. Children's attempts to alleviate elevated levels of marital conflict, or to regulate their subjective distress in response to such conflict, may be important in their adjustment to this family stressor. Children who are more distressed by marital conflict, or who are less adept at

coping with the stress of interparent conflict, may be more likely to evidence adjustment problems. In addition, affective distress and behavioral responding may be interactive processes, such that the impact of children's affective distress may be moderated by their behavioral responding and coping with marital conflict. To date, few empirical investigations have examined the role of children's affective and behavioral reactions to interparent conflict in their socioemotional adjustment.

The present investigation examined preschoolers' affect and behavioral responses to interparent conflict. To date, our understanding of how young children respond to and manage marital discord is limited. Preschool may represent an important developmental period in terms of understanding early links between marital distress and developmental competencies. While preschoolers have been found to be emotionally reactive to angry exchanges between adults (e.g., E. M. Cummings, 1987), they may be limited in their strategies for managing heightened emotionality, and more concrete in their behavioral responding. These processes in young children remain largely unexplored.

The present study examined young children's affective distress and behavioral responding to parental marital conflict. Affective distress was defined by heightened levels of negative emotionality including sadness, fear, and anger. Behavioral responding was defined as children's behavioral attempts to alleviate distress associated with exposure to marital discord. It was hypothesized that children's affective distress and maladaptive behavioral responding would be associated with more behavior problems and lower child perceived competency. In addition, behavioral responding was expected to moderate the relation between affective reactivity to conflict and outcomes.

Method

Participants

Forty-eight children (21 boys and 27 girls) and their parents participated in a laboratory research session at The Pennsylvania State University Psychology Department. Each of the target children was living with both parents at the time of their laboratory visit. The children in the sample were four years of age at the time of the session (M = 4 years, 5 months; SD = 3.48 months). Families were recruited from advertisements in the community newspaper and flyers at other community locations (e.g., libraries, grocery stores, laundromats, pediatricians' offices, preschools, day care centers). Reflective of the larger community, the ethnic and socioeconomic makeup of the sample was predominantly White and middle or working class.

Procedure

Following a brief opening interview during which informed consent was obtained, children and parents were escorted to separate interview rooms to complete self-report measures. Mothers and fathers independently completed measures of marital conflict, children's reactions to marital conflict, and child behavior problems. Under the supervision of a trained research assistant, children completed pictorial measures of reactions to marital conflict and perceived competency.

Measures

Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1993; Straus, 1979). The CTS is a widely used self-report measure of marital conflict resolution strategies used over the past 12 months. The CTS contains subscales for verbal reasoning (e.g., talked about it calmly), verbal aggression (e.g., insulted or swore) and physical aggression (e.g., threw something).

Conners Parent Rating Scale (Conners, 1985). This 48-item measure is a parent-report of

children's behavior problems. The scale yields five factors including Conduct Problems, Learning Problems, Psychosomatic, Hyperactive-Impulsive and Anxiety.

Children's Reactions to Adult Conflict Tactics (Dominguez, 1995). This measure is a parent-report measure of children's behavior in response to marital conflict. Parents report on the frequency with which their child responds to marital conflict in particular ways (e.g., crying, self-blame, misbehavior, somatic symptoms). For the purpose of the present investigation, two subscales were created. Affective Distress included items reflecting heightened negative emotionality (e.g., sadness, anger, anxiety). Behavioral Responding included items reflecting the child's behavioral attempts to alleviate distress associated with exposure to marital discord (e.g., try to protect their parents when fighting, going to their room). Internal consistencies for these subscales were found to be good, with alpha values ranging from 0.75 (mother report of behavioral responding) to 0.86 (father report of affective distress). Median scores were used to categorize children's parent-reported affective and behavioral responding (high and low).

The Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance for Young Children (Harter, 1984). This measure taps children's sense of their own competence in various domains including peer acceptance, maternal acceptance, cognitive competence and physical competence.

Reactions to Adult Conflict Tactics (REACTS; Dominguez, 1993). The REACTS is a pictorial measure that assesses the child's perceptions of his or her responses to marital conflict. This measure requires children to report on the frequency with which they respond to marital conflict in particular ways. The items on this measure parallel the items on the parent version of this questionnaire, thereby allowing for direct comparison between the child's and parents' reports of the child's behavior. Affective Distress and Behavioral Responding subscales were also created for this

measure. Internal consistencies for these subscales were found to be adequate, with alpha values of .88 and .66, respectively. Median scores were used to categorize children's self-reported affective and behavioral responding (high and low).

Results

The effects of children's affective and behavioral responding to marital conflict on their self-esteem and behavioral competencies were examined by three sets of ANOVAs.

Affective Distress and Child Outcomes

The relations between children's affective distress and perceived competency are depicted in Figure 1. Children who reported low affective distress reported higher perceived competency, $F(1,44) = 4.89$, $p = .04$. Children who had high levels of father-reported affective distress also reported higher perceived competency, $F(1,44) = 4.89$, $p = .03$. Levels of mother-reported affective distress were not associated with child perceived competency. Parent-reported behavior problems did not differ by level of affective distress. Differences were not attributable to levels of marital conflict.

Behavioral Responding and Child Outcomes

The relations between children's behavioral responding and children's perceived competency are depicted in Figure 2. Children who reported more maladaptive behavioral responding reported higher perceived competency, $F(1,44)$, $p = .046$. Mother and father reports of behavioral responding were not associated with children's perceived competency. Maladaptive behavioral responding was not associated with parent-reported child behavior problems. Findings were not attributable to differences in marital conflict.

Affective and Behavioral Interactions: Relations to Outcomes

The relations between children's affective distress, behavioral responding, and child behavior problems are depicted in Figure 3. An interaction effect for affect and behavioral responding was found, $F(1,44) = 4.32$, $p = .04$. Post-hoc analyses indicated that children who reported low affective distress and fewer maladaptive behavioral responses to interparent conflict evidenced fewer mother-reported behavior problems than did children who reported low affective distress and more maladaptive behavioral responses, Findings were not attributable to differences in marital conflict.

Discussion

Taken as a whole, findings underline the importance of children's subjective experience of marital conflict, as well as their attempts to manage this family stressor. Specifically, children's affective experience with marital discord and their behavioral responding to displays of parental marital discord were related to child outcomes. Findings suggest that children's subjective experience of marital conflict appears to play a role in their adjustment and development, beyond the effect of level of marital conflict alone. As well, children's affect and behavior appear to interrelate, particularly in relation to children's behavior problems. That is, children's behavioral responding to marital discord appears to moderate the relation between children's self-reported emotional reactivity to parental conflict and mother-reported child behavior problems.

Affective Distress and Child Outcomes

Children's reports of less affective distress in response to marital discord were associated with children's reports of higher perceived competency and self-esteem. Such a finding may suggest that family emotionality and conflict are central to preschoolers developing sense of their own competency. Children who experience less negative affect in the context of family interactions may

experience enhanced perceived competency, while children who internalize the negative emotionality associated with family conflict may be at increased risk for developing disturbances in self-concept.

In contrast to the findings of children's self-reported emotionality, fathers' reports of children's heightened distress were associated with child reports of higher perceived competency. Such a finding may suggest that children who are more outwardly expressive of their distress are protected somewhat from detrimental effects of marital discord. For instance, such expression may alert parents to their preschooler's distress, and may result in parental efforts to shield children from overt conflict.

Behavioral Responding and Child Outcomes

Findings related to behavioral responding and children's adjustment were unexpected. Children who reported higher levels of behavioral responsivity to marital distress (e.g., intervening in disputes, covering their own eyes/ears) reported higher self-esteem and perceived competency. This finding was unexpected, as active behavioral coping strategies were expected to be ineffective in reducing marital discord. However it may be the case that preschoolers experience some success when intervening in marital disputes. Covell and Miles (1992) found that as compared to parents of older children, parents of children ages 4 -6 were more likely to report that their children's attempts to intervene in marital disputes were effective in alleviating parental conflict. Taken together, these findings may suggest that young children's involvement in parental conflicts may reduce immediate levels of family discord, and may enhance their sense of self-efficacy, at least in the short-term. The implications and long-term effects of young children's involvement in marital disputes await further empirical investigation.

Affective and Behavioral Interactions: Relation to Outcomes

Findings offer some support for the interactive nature of children's emotional and behavioral responding to marital conflict; at lower levels of affective distress, but not at higher levels of distress, differences in behavioral responding were associated with differences in children's behavior problems, with maladaptive behavioral responding associated with greater behavior problems. It may be that emotional and behavioral responding are somewhat intertwined in children's experience of marital conflict. At lower levels of distress, behavioral responding may be more directly linked to children's adjustment and competencies. However, at higher levels of distress, children's affect and behavior may become more intertwined. Children who experience heightened negative emotionality may also become more behaviorally reactive to parental conflict, thereby reducing the moderating effect of behavioral responding on subsequent outcomes.

Conclusions

The present investigation highlights the complex and intertwined nature of family processes and the development of young children's socioemotional competencies. Findings suggest that children's subjective experience of marital conflict is integral to their developing sense of competency and self-esteem. In addition, there was evidence to suggest that the impact of children's affective experience on their behavioral adjustment and competencies may be somewhat moderated by their behavioral responding to parental conflict.

Unexpected findings may reflect children's successful short-term adaptation to stressful environments. It may be that very young children are able to experience some "success" in terms of reducing parental discord or removing themselves from family conflict. Also, it may be that marital conflict may have a "sleeper effect" (cf. Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989) for some

preschoolers, and that the detrimental effects associated with marital distress may emerge at later developmental points. Further research is necessary to investigate the long-term relations between marital conflict, children's coping, and children's outcomes.

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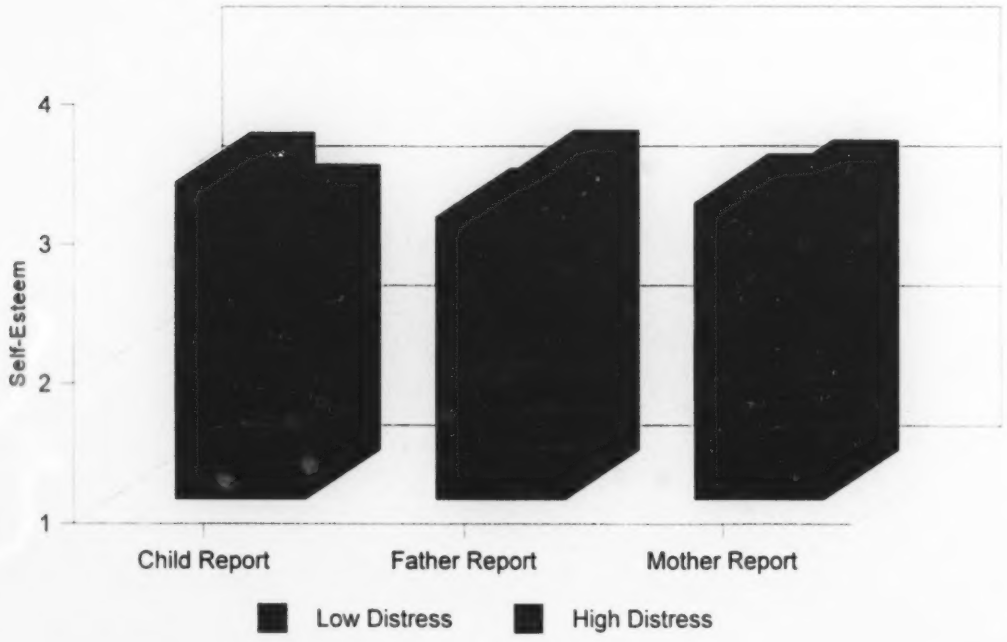
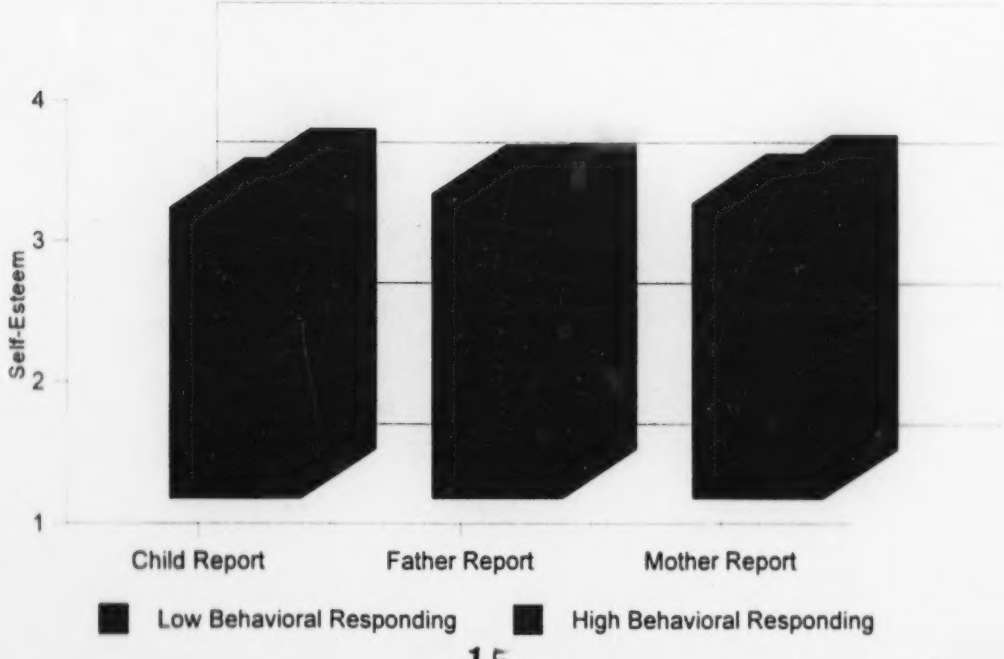
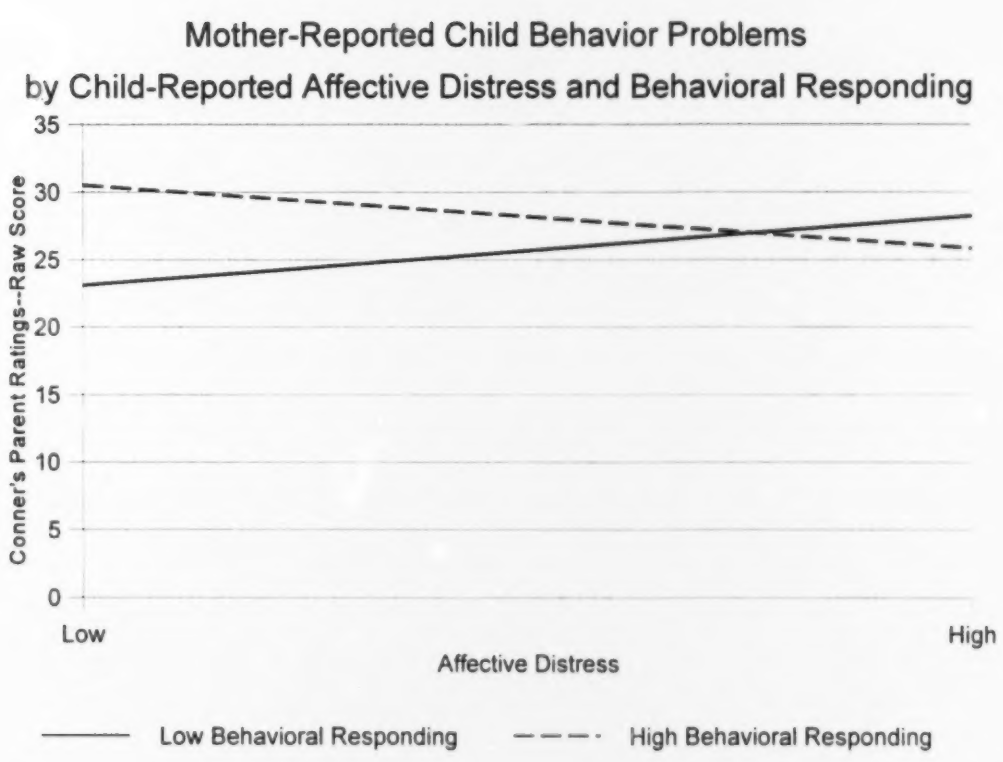
Child Self-Esteem by Self- and Parent-Rated Affective Distress in Response to Marital Conflict



Child Self-Esteem by Levels of Self- and Parent-Rated Behavioral Responding to Marital Conflict




Mother-Reported Child Behavior Problems
by Child-Reported Affective Distress and Behavioral Responding
Conner's Parent Ratings--Raw Score
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
Low
High
Affective Distress
Low Behavioral Responding
High Behavioral Responding